

A world of difference

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A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Stephanie Hepburn and Rita J. Simon
Women's Roles and Statuses the World Over
 Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006, 265 pp., ISBN 978-0-7391-1356-9 (hbk), 978-0-7391-1357-8 (pbk)

This volume sets out to be a handbook of factual information about the 'roles and statuses' of women in a large number of countries from every inhabited continent. It offers social and legal information relevant to women's rights in as comparable a form as possible. For each of 26 countries there is a (variably) brief account of the national population size and structure, the political constitution, the economy and women in the workforce, education, marriage, abortion and contraception, health care, women in public office and women in the military. This promised to be a very useful material for comparative studies, or a handy source of international illustrations for teachers and students alike in gender studies.

Unfortunately, the book cannot be recommended for such purposes. At a general level, there is no introduction to the concepts that it is trying to unite, of what is meant by a role, nor is there a clear definition of 'status'. The reader is left to her/his own devices to pick out those instances where 'status', say economic or marital, is just a description of a particular type of situation, or is loaded with value from the point of view of the social esteem in which the position is held, the economic rewards attaching to it, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by incumbents or standing in law, etc. These various dimensions of 'status' sometimes but not always coincide, and it is important to understand this when considering the 'status of women' and the policies that may improve its various dimensions. I also

missed any overview of how each society divides up the responsibilities for its reproduction between men and women.

Perhaps because these descriptions have been compiled by authors working in the field of law, there is little attention paid to the informal, unregulated activities, which make an important part of many women's lives. Not only does the family law section say little about informal cohabitation, the work and economy sections say relatively little about the 'informal' and 'precarious' undocumented sectors of employment, which are often disproportionately providing livelihoods for women. There is even less about unpaid domestic work, which links the family to the economy and often constrains women's paid employment. Another limitation is that little attention is (or perhaps could be) given in a comparable way to inequalities within countries – gender differences across social, ethnic, regional or age groups. The study of particular countries or comparisons would have to dig deeper, but it should only start from here with the warning that the compilers have not understood some of the economic and labour market indicators they present. For many countries they give a figure in US\$ billion for 'purchasing power parity', which is presumably an incomplete label for some form of National Income. Another error it would be better not to perpetuate is the presentation of data on the 'percentage of women in wage employment' (e.g. p. 84 for France and p. 225 for India), as the ratio of women's to total wage earnings, rather than the proportion of waged workers who were female. There are other examples where the lifting of percentages and ratios has lost their original definition, and the reader cannot tell what is being counted in either numerator or denominator. It is surprising that the publishers did not exercise more quality control. It is also surprising that they did not provide a table of contents and running headers identifying which country is covered in given sets of pages.

A possibly saving grace is that almost all the statistics presented are documented in footnotes. Some of these could be useful pointers. I would caution against the CIA Factbook, which produced some inaccuracies, but recommend the UNIFEM website. Their latest report, *Progress of the World's Women 2005*, is a well illustrated, and well thought through account of the role of paid and unpaid work, in women's poverty and empowerment, as well as the effort of a bigger team. I would actually recommend a comparative study of women's economic roles to start here.

The comparative material on family law may be more reliable and useful. For example, several Middle Eastern countries have different rules about which parent has custody of sons and daughters after divorce. The information on women in parliaments may also be useful, but without paying attention to dates, could be misleading if cited out of context. The information on women in the military is also interesting, but is also sometimes incomplete and almost certainly outdated. There is not very much about the very complex questions of pensions and care of the elderly.

The description of Emmeline Pankhurst as a single mother set me wondering about possible changes in the connotation of the term over the distance of a century. We still need to improve understanding of the meaning of women's situations across the world today. This book helps a little, but could have done better.

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